

5-1-1981

Mexican Indian Dance Masks

Jo Farb Hernandez

San Jose State University, jo.hernandez@sjsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/artdesign_pub



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jo Farb Hernandez. "Mexican Indian Dance Masks" *African Arts* (1981): 81-82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3335648>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art and Art History & Design Departments at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

a single sequence of slides or a short film would have done. The sense of condensing the events into less than half an hour was remarkable.

It is necessary to add, however, that effective as the multivision slide and sound show was, it could not take the place of a number of films that were made in the Grasslands under the supervision of Dr. Koloss. The cameraman was Hermann Schlenker, (Hamburg-Burgberg.) I had the opportunity to see several hours of partially edited film at the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film in Göttingen. These, when finally edited, would prove to be a most effective series from a single African culture. As with other films in the center, each film tells its own story; there is no narration. One example that I saw shows the full history of a dance performance, from the gathering of the dancers and costuming, through the development of the dance. Too often, brief clips fail to show how African dances develop and change during the course of a single performance.

In a footnote to this review, I should add that the Linden-Museum is closed for extensive repairs that will take several years, the other Museum is also closed for repairs, the Lübeck Museum (under the capable direction of Dr. Helga Rammow) has just had a serious setback. The museum, which since World War II has existed only as storage and work areas, was finally to have had new exhibit space. The city, however, has repossessed the promised building for a school. Along with other fine and important collections, the Tessmann Fang pieces will remain in storage.

Roy Sieber
Indiana University



1. DEVIL MASK. GUERRERO (NAHUA).
CARVED BY JOSE RODRIGUEZ, ca. 1930.

MEXICAN INDIAN DANCE MASKS

Traditional Artifacts, San Francisco
November 19-December 31, 1980

This major exhibition of more than one hundred 19th- and 20th-century Mexican Indian dance masks, drawn from the largest collection in the United States, was put together by Beth Burstein and Robert Lauter. It surveyed the incredible range of media, styles, and aesthetics found across the Mexican states, and proved that these objects are sculpturally and expressively among the finest examples of ethnographic art to be found anywhere. The exhibition came at a time when interest in masks had been whetted by the recent publication of the late Donald Cordry's book, *Mexican Masks* (see review, p. 86). The book and exhibition (which displayed many pieces from the original Cordry collection) have given us an excellent basis on which to judge and compare these masks, many types of which had never before been on public display.

The collectors became interested in Mexican Indian dance masks about five years ago. They have acquired approximately 1,000 examples, drawn together primarily from several major old Mexican collections. Burstein and Lauter met with the Cordrys and gathered information on the masks. The show at Traditional Artifacts was the first major viewing of a large percentage of this collection.

Mexican masks do not fall into distinct categories, as do certain types of African or Oceanic art. Aesthetic norms in Mexico tended to be less restrictive and consistent than in other societies: not only is it difficult to pinpoint the village of provenance of a mask, for example, but often even the region or state is doubtful. In addition, despite the fact that Mexico has been crisscrossed with great regularity by anthropologists both native and foreign, it is not always possible to tell which character or even which dance a mask is used for. There tends to be a great amount of aesthetic freedom for interpretation of the legends and tales that the masks symbolize, and it is these variances in



form, use of symbolism, and of course surface carving, painting, and assemblages that make them so exciting.

One of the finest Mexican mask-makers was José Rodríguez de Guerrero, one of the few artists whose works can be easily identified. The mask in Figure 1 was one of 25 carved and danced in the Diablo Macho dance, used to petition for rain on June 5. Along with 8 more of the 25 pictured in Cordry's book, it is replete with snakes and lizards (universal water symbols) well integrated into the naturalistic human face. The projecting snakes were not added; the mask was carved from a single piece of wood. Its excellent condition, despite its age (ca. 1930), also emphasized the care and protection offered by those who used the masks, and its importance to them.

A group of Yaqui and Mayo Pascola masks (Fig. 3), were among the most appealing and sculpturally some of the strongest on display. The Pascola dancer opens and closes a religious fiesta and serves as a focal point through it, acting as dancer, comic, and host. Pascola masks may be worn on the front, side, or back of the head, depending on the specific time, function, and dance. They are fairly small, with long horse- or goat-hair eyebrows and beards, and represent humans or animals (usually goats or monkeys). Crosses and other geometric or



2. CARNIVAL MASK FOR MACHO CABRILLO (GOAT)
DANCE: EL NANTE, HIDALGO (OTOMI).

3. PASCOLA MASK (MAYO). RIO FUERTE, SINALOA

natural forms are incised, painted or inlaid into the cheeks and forehead, some of which probably evolved from traditional face painting and have religious meanings.

The twisted nose and smile of the carnival masks for the Macho Cabrillo (Goat) Dance, from Hidalgo, were reminiscent of the Iroquois false faces and the Seneca and Northwest Coast masks. Although their exact significance has not yet been determined, it is clear that the exaggerated and distorted facial features were important to carnival festivities. The mask in Figure 2 was embellished with bells, and the surface was carved and then further enhanced by glittery glass flakes affixed to the wet paint. Evidence of earlier treatments of color and pattern exists on many of the older examples, for masks were often refurbished and repainted prior to each use; this is especially true for the carnival types whose brightness and color were essential to the spirit of the celebration. New ribbons or colored paper were also added at this time. In Figure 2, pebbles were introduced into the hollow portion of the horns to increase the audio impact of the dancer's performance.

A large group of the masks represented in the exhibit were those in which human and animal forms are synthesized. These are found in almost every mask-making region in Mexico and are used in a wide variety of dances. Those appearing most commonly include those animals important to ancient belief or custom (such as the jaguar, or *tigre*, used in the famous Dance of the Tigre), or those that are common to the area. Snakes, frogs and lizards are water and fertility symbols. Bats and owls represent the Devil, night and death, and are therefore helpful in social and religious education and control. Many of these conglomerate masks were earlier used in dances in which the wearer transformed himself into the creature or force represented, permitting mastery over this force.

A large portion of the masks were naturalistic representations of the human face, some depicting historical characters such as Cortés or St. James (Santiago), or types such as old men, Moors, or Christians.

Taken as a whole, the Traditional Artifacts exhibition explored the wide diversity in Mexican Indian dance masks while maintaining high aesthetic quality and impressive vintage. As the first major exhibition of its kind in the area, it fulfilled an important educational role.

Joanne Farb Hernandez
Triton Museum of Art
Sam Hernandez
University of Santa Clara

CHRISTIAN IMAGERY IN AFRICAN ART
The Britt Family Collection
The Snite Museum of Art
University of Notre Dame
November 9-December 28, 1980

The newly opened Snite Museum of Art recently held an exhibition exploring the concept of syncretism in African art with regard to Christian iconography. Syncretism, in this instance, refers to the reinterpretation, recombination, or blending of standard Christian im-

agery or symbols with African religious imagery, meanings, and usages. As a subject of an African art exhibition, this would appear to be the first notable effort in this direction in the English-speaking world.

The exhibition consisted of 25 objects, including Kongo crucifixes of the *nkangi*, *kuzulu*, and *ntadi* varieties, a Kongo *toni malau* statue, three Holo *nzambi* (framed) figures, and an Ibo *agbogno mmuo* mask featuring a crucifixion scene with angels and Virgin. From the Chokwe, Pende, Makonde, and Kamba, several statuettes and a cane presented madonna-like figures, and a Benin metal object and an Akan comb illustrated the cross in relief or openwork. Three Lobi statuettes with outstretched arms, a Dogon piece, a wooden processional cross from Ethiopia, and a recently carved Senufo crucifix were also included, though they were marginal to the subject of syncretism.

The catalogue, written by Douglas E. Bradley, provides ample notes for each of the Kongo crucifixes as well as other objects, citing patination as evidence for a syncretic function and treating the historical implications of this imagery. A few pieces, however, are doubly problematic, not only in the determination of their ritual use but, more basically, in the identification of their precise ethnic style. Although treatment of syncretism in African art barely ventures beyond the objects displayed, this exhibit brought to mind other examples, par-

ticularly in Portuguese-influenced Africa; for example, the Chokwe *tshingelengelé* motif found on masks and elsewhere, and African *santos* carvings. Apart from a syncretic approach, one was equally reminded of Fr. Kevin Carroll's experiments with traditional Yoruba carvers, mission-sponsored art schools, and other mission efforts that have received less attention. Certainly, the ramifications of Christian imagery in African art deserve further attention.

This collection originated in the enthusiasm of Rev. Raymond E. Britt, Jr., an Episcopal priest, aided by bequests from Ernst Anspach and Alfred Scheinberg, and will be part of the permanent collection of the Snite Museum. The museum has assembled art objects of this genre from other parts of the world; with further acquisitions and donations, additional studies and exhibits on the subject of religious syncretism are anticipated. As an initial effort, this exhibition was significant.

The 19-page catalogue, with 19 black and white photographs, is available from: The Snite Museum of Art, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556. \$4.00.

Arthur P. Bourgeois
Governors State University



NTADI (FUNERARY MONUMENT), KONGO, BAMBOMA, ZAIRE/ANGOLA, 18TH-19TH CENTURIES. STEATITE, BLACK PAINT, 25.4cm. LEFT, NKANGI KIDITU (CRUCIFIX), KONGO, ZAIRE/ANGOLA, 16TH-18TH CENTURIES. BRASS, VEGETABLE FIBER, 33.7cm.